



In Alabama, children as well as adults can get involved in community emergency preparedness programmes.

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# Citizen Corps: preparing for emergencies in the US

## ▶▶ Key points

- In emergencies, first responders' operational capacity may be stretched.
- Additional help from volunteers is essential, and it is important these volunteers are fully trained.
- The US Citizen Corps programme is producing groups of volunteers who can step in to help in any emergency.

In 2004, a tropical depression passed through the city of Danville, Virginia, resulting in a tornado and winds in excess of 100 mph. Hundreds of trees and powerlines were blown down, blocking roads and leaving neighbourhoods without the ability to call for, or receive,

*A key factor in any community's resilience is the ability to call on a bank of volunteers who are not only willing to help but are properly trained to do so. Lana MacGill looks at how the US Citizen Corps programme is providing just such a response.*

first responder assistance. Neighbours depended on one another to search the area, identify hazards and remove debris that was preventing emergency vehicles from reaching the scene. As Doug Young, director of the Danville, Virginia Department of Emergency Services, said: "The neighbourhood residents were on their own."

These events were the prompt that Danville needed to train its community in emergency preparedness. Luckily

for the city, and other regions prone to extreme weather and natural disasters, the mechanism through which to do so is already in place and is celebrating its fifth anniversary this year. The nationwide Citizen Corps, part of the US Freedom Corps, has been training and preparing volunteers for emergencies such as these since 2002, under its community emergency response team (CERT) programme.

Danville signed up to the scheme



immediately after the tornado and now trains volunteers in a range of skills including map reading, adult and child first aid and mobile command post operations. Danville schools take part in CERT-training and command staff from the CERT programme are included in the city's Initial Emergency Operations Center Plan, where they work alongside city and state organisations such as fire, police, social services and the Virginia Department of Emergency Management. It is a picture that is mirrored across the US.

### Efficient response

The ability of any community to respond quickly and efficiently to an emergency situation, be it a man-made or natural disaster, lies not only with its official emergency responders – the police, fire and ambulance services – but also with the volunteer organisations that can provide additional manpower. In many cases, it will be these local volunteers, caught up in the emergency themselves, who will be on the ground before the first responders arrive, providing assistance and reassurance to members of their own community.

Increasingly, volunteers are also called on to perform more complex tasks. For example, the recent US Government Accountability Office report on transport-disadvantaged populations highlighted such important factors as ensuring that volunteer drivers were also trained in helping elderly or disabled passengers on and off the transport provided. Clearly, there is a need to not only organise willing volunteers, but to ensure they are trained for every contingency they may encounter. Citizen Corps is meeting this need.

Although the training its members undergo prepares them for any disaster, Citizen Corps was founded as a direct response to the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US. In January 2002, President George W Bush issued a national call to service, in which he urged all US citizens to donate 4,000 hours over the course of their lifetime (approximately two hours a week throughout adult life) to serving their communities. To enable this, the USA Freedom Corps was formed, under which comes Citizen Corps. This comprises of the federal volunteer programmes

neighborhood watch, volunteers in police service (VIPS), medical reserve corps and community emergency response teams. Five years on, Citizen Corps boasts 2,149 local councils that serve 212 million people, or 74 per cent of the total US population. The organisation also teaches its members how to set up and run volunteer reception centres. These centres manage spontaneous volunteers with no previous affiliation to a volunteer group who put themselves forward during times of disaster and co-ordinate Citizen Corps volunteers arriving to help from other areas.

Sidney Hoffman, of the Alabama unit, says: "Citizen Corps is the citizen preparedness initiative for the state. It unites all professional and volunteer

**'We are building a culture that will make our community more disaster resistant. We are able to make our civilian population a real asset in cases of disaster or major incident'**

responders from the state level to the grassroots level and encourages participation from all stakeholders. It has also brought together partners that have not traditionally had formal partnerships with government, such as inter-faith networks."

James E Davis, CERT co-ordinator and county emergency management co-ordinator for Pittsylvania, Virginia adds: "The intent of this programme is not to replace our existing emergency service providers, but to create a trained cadre of volunteers who can perform other duties and tasks that complement rather than duplicate services."

As Bruce Ahlmann, director of the Des Plaines, Illinois, branch of Citizen Corps explains: "During the first hours of a major emergency it has been shown that volunteers help themselves, their neighbour and their community, while first responders take on the more serious situations."

### Police training

The training Citizen Corps members undergo, and the assistance this enables them to provide, is impressive. In Des Plaines, VIPS complete a 10-week citizens' police academy, then go on to an additional eight classes on the general orders of the police department, including general law on search and seizure, the handling of marked police vehicles and use of radio. Serving a community adjacent to Chicago, at the hub of 33 rail crossings, VIPS have assisted police in controlling incident perimeters during train derailments, including one where the derailment also blocked major roads. They have also helped with traffic control around serious and fatal traffic accidents and flooding that blocked local highways.

Bruce Ahlmann, director of the Des Plaines Citizen Corps, takes part in the city's planning for emergencies and has participated in countywide tabletop medical emergency planning exercises. He meets and co-ordinates with the city's homeland security co-ordinator and sits on the meetings of its Emergency Management Agency. Ahlmann says: "Citizen Corps offers a means through which to share best practices, learn where additional benefits can be achieved and how the integration of the programmes into the city's plans offer additional opportunities for citizens to assist their city during an emergency."

### Severe weather warnings

Pittsylvania Citizen Corps volunteers are trained in the Sky-Warn system for predicting and monitoring severe weather. They have used amateur radios to relay 911 calls to the emergency services when a region was left without telephone cables



and have provided damage assessments in tornado-struck areas, documenting addresses, photographing damage and providing vital information to the county's damage assessment team. In addition to helping their own community, they have also arranged collection, packing and distribution for goods donated to other areas of the US hit by severe weather. During Hurricane Dennis and Hurricane Katrina, Pittsylvania Citizen Corps

bank of volunteers benefits the national community as well as the local area. During the 2004 hurricane season, the Waconia, Minnesota, Citizen Corps was one of the many national units that deployed volunteers to affected areas of the southeast US. John Olson, a Citizen Corps volunteer and member of the Waconia Fire and Rescue Department, says: "Members of our CERT team were deployed in the states of Alabama and North Carolina for up to six months.

emergency volunteers who benefit the community and neighbourhoods in which they live.

"They can respond quickly, prior to the arrival of first responders. They further the message to other individuals, families, schools and businesses to develop their own preparedness and communications plans in anticipation of an emergency that could happen at any time."

The Waconia Citizen Corps also undertakes training in light fire suppression, search and rescue, elderly evacuation and winter survival as well as general disaster preparedness and disaster psychology. The latter issue is an important one: the psychological effects of a disaster can, to many people, be as damaging as the physical.

Sidney Hoffman, of the Alabama Citizen Corps, says: "Many members state that the training and education provide a psychological benefit because they know they have taken the necessary steps to prepare for a disaster."

John Roselund, of the Logan County Colorado unit, adds: "We are building a culture of preparedness, awareness and involvement that will make our community more disaster resistant. We are able to make our civilian population a real asset in cases of disaster or major incident."

## 'Local volunteers, caught up in the emergency themselves, will be on the ground before the first responders arrive'

volunteers issued door-to-door evacuation notices, staffed medical needs shelters and assisted professional responders in transporting individuals from flooded areas. In Logan County, Colorado, volunteers responded to 2004's Sterling Tornado by checking on residents in their streets and identifying those with special needs, removing debris and assisting the professional emergency responders. They also helped to prepare preliminary damage assessments and assisted in clean-up operations.

Having a highly trained, highly motivated

"In this role, they acted not as CERT volunteers but as full-time members of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Their primary tasks included assessing neighbourhoods that were damaged and providing information to affected citizens on where to go for federal assistance."

In September 2006, the same CERT team was deployed to assist with clean-up efforts after tornados caused damage in the more local Carver County. The team helped remove building debris from agricultural fields in time for the autumn harvest. Olson adds: "Citizen Corps members are skilled

### Citizen Corps during Hurricane Katrina

Before, during and after Hurricane Katrina, the Marshall County Citizen Corps, partnered with numerous faith- and community-based non-profit organisations, joined forces with municipal and county government to respond to the needs of 2,500 evacuees arriving in their county from the affected area. The Marshall County Emergency Management Agency, along with the Citizen Corps community emergency response team volunteers, set up an evacuee central processing centre where evacuees could register for federal and Red Cross assistance, as well as inquire about employment, schools, health care, mental health care and other services.

The volunteers established a warehouse where all donations were received,

processed, categorised and readied for distribution to the evacuees. A volunteers' amateur radio unit provided communications to the affected regions of Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. In many instances, this was the only way evacuees could receive communication from the communities they had evacuated. The radio unit also helped set up a communications trailer at the state park, which included phone, fax and internet capabilities for evacuees' use.

Sidney Hoffman, of Alabama Citizen Corps, says: "Without the assistance of Marshall County Citizen Corps and CERT members, the 2,500 evacuees, all of whom arrived within a week, would not have been afforded basic housing and human services during the response."

### The value of volunteers

The benefits to the community in terms of reassurance and assistance are clearly huge, and this is matched by the financial benefit the volunteers provide. The most recent figures on volunteer time in the US puts the value at USD18 an hour, or USD280 billion a year to the national economy. Where volunteers' work is tied to skilled jobs, the value per voluntary hour increases even more. The Danville Citizen Corps provided 7,632 volunteer hours in 2006 – worth nearly USD138,000.

Since joining the programme, volunteers in Danville have assisted with damage assessment following tornados, mass triage after a plane crash at the 2006 Danville Regional Air Show and have helped at the scene of a train collision. They set up a relay communications system when a major phone line was severed and checked on local elderly people and nursing home

residents. Volunteers have also taken part in planning and actual exercises of Danville's homeland security drill.

The Citizen Corps programme may have been set up in response to a very specific event, but its impact has reached much further than the potential threat from terrorism. The willingness of the volunteers to help their community and to train on specialist equipment and in complex procedures is showing benefits in a wide range of emergency response situations.

As Bruce Ahlmann, director of the Des Plaines, Illinois, Citizen Corps, says: "Preparing for a medical emergency, whether by distributing medications or first aid, can only be a benefit that everyone hopes will never be needed." ■

*Lana MacGill is a freelance journalist with a particular interest in emergency preparedness and response issues.*



Citizen Corps volunteers in Pennsylvania are taught how to tackle fires.